

Photospot:

The endemic kestrels of the Cape Verde Islands

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Les crécerelles endémiques des îles du Cap-Vert. Deux formes endémiques de crécerelles occupent les îles du Cap-Vert: *alexandri*, dans les îles de l'est et du sud, et *neglectus*, dans les îles du nord-ouest. Les deux taxons sont traditionnellement traités comme des sous-espèces du Faucon crécerelle *Falco tinnunculus*, mais leur traitement comme espèces à part entière pourrait peut-être se justifier, surtout dans le cas de *neglectus*, sur la base de leur morphologie distinctive et leur long isolement par rapport aux races continentales. *Alexandri* est plus grand que *neglectus* et possède un plumage plus coloré. Son dimorphisme sexuel est net, tandis qu'il est faible ou même absent chez *neglectus*. Les deux crécerelles sont des résidents communs et se nourrissent de petites proies, telles que gros insectes, lézards, souris et même oiseaux. Leur divergence pourrait avoir été causée par leur isolement géographique pendant la dernière glaciation, quand l'archipel a été divisé en deux groupes d'îles qui correspondent à la distribution actuelle des deux taxons. Elle pourrait toutefois également être le résultat de colonisations successives, *neglectus* ayant fait partie d'une première vague et ayant été remplacé par la suite dans les îles de l'est et du sud par *alexandri*, arrivé dans une deuxième vague qui n'a pas atteint les îles du nord-ouest.

The Cape Verdes boast two endemic kestrel taxa, *alexandri* ('Alexander's Kestrel') and *neglectus* ('Neglected Kestrel'). Traditionally, they have been treated as subspecies of Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (Cramp & Simmons 1980, Orta 1994, Dickinson 2003), a course also followed by recent identification guides (Borrow & Demey 2001, 2004). Unsurprisingly, advocates of phylogenetic species concepts accord them species rank (e.g. Hazevoet 1995). However, even under the Biological Species Concept, specific treatment may be justified, particularly for *neglectus*, on the grounds of their distinctive morphology and long isolation from mainland races (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). Alexander's Kestrel is restricted to the eastern and southern islands of Sal, Boavista, Maio, Santiago, Fogo, Brava and Ilhéus do Rombo, whilst Neglected Kestrel occurs on the north-western islands of Santo Antão, São Vicente, Santa Luzia, Branco, Raso and São Nicolau. Both are common residents that can be seen almost anywhere, from coasts to the highest peaks, but densities appear higher near human settlements and in agricultural areas. For example, during a visit to the Cape Verdes in November 2006, I found Alexander's Kestrel to be common in the capital Praia, on Santiago. On this island, it was also numerous in the Serra do Pico da Antónia, a mountain range with valleys and slopes dominated by plantations.

Neglected Kestrel, on the other hand, was easy to see in the Faja Valley, an extensive agricultural area in the north-west of São Nicolau.

Although the easternmost island of the north-western group, São Nicolau, lies just c.110 km from Sal, the nearest island in the eastern and southern group, the difference in appearance between the two falcons is remarkable. Alexander's Kestrel is, first of all, noticeably larger; its size and jizz being comparable to that of the nominate race of Common Kestrel, whereas the smaller Neglected Kestrel, which also appears to have a shorter tail and smaller wings, looks rather like a bulky Merlin *F. columbarius*.

Both have banded tails and are heavily marked and spotted, but Alexander's Kestrel has brighter plumage than its north-western counterpart. Its upperparts are reddish in the male and golden-brown in the female, and its breast is pale, whereas the upperparts of *neglectus* are brownish and its breast is more dirty looking, which, combined with the strong markings, gives the bird a dark and cold impression (Figs. 5–6). Sexual plumage dimorphism in *neglectus* is weak or absent. The male can have some grey on the head or tail, but these parts are mostly brown, as in a typical female.

Apart from the different-coloured upperparts, *alexandri* exhibits other differences between the sexes. The male has a greyish forehead, grey ear-coverts and a grey tail, whereas the female has a



brown head, with only some grey on the ear-coverts, and a brown tail. Hazevoet (1995) and Clarke (2006) state that males also have grey in the crown, but this is apparently not always the case, as demonstrated in Fig. 2. The male's underwings are paler and less barred and spotted than the female's (Fig. 3). As in nominate *tinnunculus*, the male is also slightly smaller than the female. *Neglectus* shows no significant differences in size between the sexes.

Both taxa feed on small prey such as large insects, skinks, mice and even birds, as I found when examining the contents of pellets on Raso. The African Migratory Locust *Locusta migratoria migratorioides*, which was abundant in autumn 2006, appears to be a main prey item, when available. I gained the impression that the hunting strategies of these kestrels differed slightly, with Alexander's Kestrel being the more active. On Santiago I observed it mostly in the air, both soaring and circling high, or hovering and flying fast

lower above ground. Only occasionally did I observe this taxon on the ground, resting or feeding, or perched on lamp posts or buildings. The Neglected Kestrels on São Nicolau, in contrast, were nearly always observed perched on poles or electricity lines. I rarely saw them in flight and only once did I observe a bird hovering. Was this just coincidence or is Neglected Kestrel more of a sit-and-wait kind of hunter? Both kestrels consume their prey on a perch, but large insects are also consumed on the wing (Fig. 4).

How the two taxa diverged is still debated. Hazevoet (1995) mentions several different plausible factors. Geographical isolation, due to the last glaciation, may have been a cause, as the archipelago was then divided into two island groups that concur with the present ranges of *alexandri* and *neglectus*. However, divergence may also be the result of separate colonisations, with *neglectus* belonging to the first wave, to be replaced on the eastern and southern islands by *alexandri* in a second wave which did not reach the north-western islands.

Captions to plates on opposite page

Figure 1. Female Alexander's Kestrel *Falco (tinnunculus) alexandri* / femelle, Praia, Santiago, Cape Verde Islands, 14 October 2006 (Edwin Winkel)

Figure 2. Alexander's Kestrel *Falco (tinnunculus) alexandri*, Tarrafal, Santiago, Cape Verde Islands, 14 October 2006 (Edwin Winkel). Typical male, but without grey on the crown / Mâle typique, mais sans gris sur la calotte.

Figure 3. Alexander's Kestrel *Falco (tinnunculus) alexandri*, Praia, Santiago, Cape Verde Islands, 14 October 2006 (Edwin Winkel). Hovering male / Mâle en vol sur place.

Figure 4. Alexander's Kestrel *Falco (tinnunculus) alexandri*, Praia, Santiago, Cape Verde Islands, 14 October 2006 (Edwin Winkel). Male, eating an insect on the wing like Red-footed Falcon *F. vespertinus* / Mâle, mangeant un insecte en vol comme un Faucon kobez *F. vespertinus*.

Figure 5. Neglected Kestrel *Falco (tinnunculus) neglectus*, Cachaço, São Nicolau, Cape Verde Islands, 25 October 2006 (Edwin Winkel). The uniform ground colour and the heavy marks give it a dark and cold appearance / La couleur de base uniforme et les marques prononcés contribuent à l'apparence foncée et 'froide' de ce taxon.

Figure 6. Neglected Kestrel *Falco (tinnunculus) neglectus*, Cachaço, São Nicolau, Cape Verde Islands, 25 October 2006 (Edwin Winkel)

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